



# International Alert's approach to peacebuilding

## PRACTICE BRIEF

**International Alert is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) working with people affected by violent conflict in over 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe for over 35 years.**

Our **vision** is that people and their societies can resolve conflicts without violence, working together to build inclusive and sustainable peace.

To achieve this vision, it is our **mission** to break cycles of violence and to build sustainable peace by:

- working with people directly affected by violent conflict to find lasting solutions
- shaping policies and practice to reduce and prevent violence and support sustainable peace
- collaborating with all those striving for peace to strengthen our collective voice and impact

## What is peace?

**Peace is when people resolve conflicts without using violence. It is also the conditions that allow for respectful coexistence and positive social change, without use of violence.**

At Alert we understand that conflict is an inevitable part of living in a society. Conflict is a result of differences between people or groups, including differences in relative power. Typically, some conflict is necessary in order for positive social change to occur, because changes to the status quo are not wanted by all people. Alert therefore does not view conflict itself as inherently bad. It is the use of violence to bring about change or to gain or maintain power (i.e. violent conflict) that we see as the problem.

We work to support people affected by or at risk of violent conflict to prevent or end the violence. Because some conflict in society is inevitable, finding non-violent solutions to conflicts requires social change: people have to change their attitudes or their behaviour, and societies may need to

change their established institutions. Therefore, as well as focussing on ending or preventing violence, we work to create the conditions for ongoing positive social change – that is, addressing societal differences or conflict without using violence.

The absence of *direct violence* is sometimes known as *negative peace*. A ceasefire might stop the violence, but it does not necessarily resolve the conflict between those fighting, or the issues (or 'drivers') that led to that conflict. While achieving negative peace is often the first goal for maintaining peaceful societies, the absence of direct or overt violence does not necessarily mean that a society is peaceful. There may be underlying inequalities, injustice or conflict between groups of people by established institutions or processes, known as *structural violence*. The absence of structural violence and the peaceful management of differences is known as *positive peace*.

A society is never in a fixed state: new tensions or desires for change arise all the time. Therefore, peace is also not fixed. A society can be more or less peaceful depending on how prone to violence it is at any one time. And if some people are living in peace at the expense of others, the society as a whole cannot be seen as peaceful. Given the constant pressure for societies to adapt and change, there is a constant possibility of violence being used to attempt to bring about (or prevent) change. Peace needs to be constantly built and maintained.

## What is peacebuilding?

For International Alert, **peacebuilding** means supporting people in or at risk of conflict to prevent or end direct violence, and creating the conditions for sustainable peaceful coexistence and peaceful social change by addressing structural violence.

Preventing or ending direct violence requires people to talk to one another, build relationships and come to agreements



Police officers being trained to be trainers in the use of our Community Score Card in Lumbhini province, Nepal. This is a process of non-confrontational dialogues designed to improve collaboration and mutual accountability between the community and police. © Nepal Police

about how to resolve conflicts without fighting. It often also requires a shifting of power and greater social equity. Creating the conditions for ongoing positive social change and addressing structural violence also requires communication and relationships between those who seek change and those who maintain the status quo, whether that is in formal institutions or through the established attitudes and behaviours in society. Societal structures, attitudes and behaviours are well established, and influencing those who have the power to change them is a long-term endeavour.

In many contexts there are groups or actors who may seek or foster violent conflict and benefit from it – for example, to weaken a neighbouring region, generate or sustain business opportunities, or reinforce political narratives and authority. Peacebuilding involves calling out and challenging such groups and actors and trying to limit their capacity to foment violent conflict or gain from it.

We do not undertake *peacekeeping* (providing a physical presence to prevent the resumption of violence) and tend not to get directly involved in national or international *peacemaking* (high-level, elite negotiations aimed at stopping immediate violence). Our peacebuilding focusses at the community and societal levels, on strengthening relationships before, during or after violent conflict, and in creating the ongoing conditions for peaceful coexistence and positive social change.

## Why should we build peace?

At its most basic level, we believe that killing or injuring other people is wrong. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares, “Everyone has the right to life”.

But in addition, **violence is not an effective way to resolve conflicts**. Violence emerges because people disagree strongly, or as a route to power or dominance from a particular group. Killing people does not address the root causes of those conflicts. When military force is deployed to counter a military threat, it cannot resolve underlying political, social, economic and governance problems or sustain peace.

Moreover, **violent conflict makes people’s lives worse**. A quarter of the world’s population, two billion people, live in conflict-affected places.[1] At the end of 2021, one in 78 people in the world had been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence and persecution, a total of 89.3 million. This had risen to over 100 million by June 2022.[2] **The world’s least peaceful countries are among those with the highest levels of food insecurity** – 65% of people in countries with low peace and low income have difficulties affording adequate food.[3]

Violence hinders productivity and economic activity, destabilises institutions and reduces business confidence.

In 2021, **violence cost the equivalent of 10% of the world's economic activity**, or \$2,117 per person.[4] In the ten countries most affected by violence, the economic cost of violence averaged 34% of GDP in 2021, compared to 3.6% for the ten least affected countries.

As a result, **violent conflict prevents positive development**. Conflict and fragility have become the single biggest obstacles to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Extreme poverty in non-fragile contexts continues to decrease, but fragile and conflict-affected places remain stuck. By 2030, two-thirds of the world's extremely poor people will live in such places.[5] Conflict drives 80% of humanitarian need.[6]

In our interdependent world, **violent conflict has global negative effects**. In 2022, in addition to the 7.1 million people displaced inside Ukraine and the 4.9 million refugees who had left the country, the World Bank estimated that the war in Ukraine might bring up to 95 million people globally into extreme poverty. The UN Global Crisis Response Group estimated that 1.2 billion people were severely exposed to finance, food and energy consequences of the crisis simultaneously.[7]

A world which seeks to leave no one behind must focus increasingly on those who live in the most fragile and conflict-affected places, where progress towards sustainable development and collective prosperity has stalled or gone into reverse. We need to address violent conflict in order to improve all other aspects of people's lives.

## How does Alert build peace?

We work with those affected by conflict to end violence and create the conditions for peaceful coexistence and positive social change. Our work supports building peaceful relationships between all sectors of society, developing and supporting societies' mechanisms for keeping the peace, and helping to ensure that everyone can live satisfying, peaceful lives.

### Working with those affected by conflict

We believe that violent conflict can only be resolved sustainably by those directly affected by it. The solutions to societal problems must by their very nature be applied from within society, which means appropriate changes need to be defined and achieved by people and organisations in the conflict-affected places where we work. The participation and collaboration of those most affected by the conflict, and people with diverse perspectives, are essential for both ending violence and building sustainable peace.

Finding peaceful solutions to conflict, whether direct or structural, requires bringing together people with different views. Without including people with different (and sometimes conflicting) perspectives, peace is impossible.

Moreover, a society that structurally excludes some of its members is a society that is failing to resolve conflicts and is thus prone to violence. While people in any society will have differing kinds of power, a society that does not exclude sections of the population from power on account of their membership of a particular group or identity (such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability or religion) is better able to resolve conflicts without using violence. Therefore, we work to support the **inclusion** of people of all groups and identities in decisions in society. Some groups are more marginalised from discussions than others, so we focus on finding ways to ensure equitable access and meaningful inclusion in decision making. Depending on the needs of the context, we may focus particularly on supporting inclusion of youth or people from a particularly marginalised ethnic group. Working for inclusion also involves challenging and calling out those who work against it.

Within our peacebuilding work, we place a special emphasis on understanding and addressing **gender** dynamics within societies as they relate to violent conflict. Gender is the socially constructed roles, characteristics and behaviours considered appropriate for men and women; it is independent of biological sex. Gender is learned through socialisation processes and it changes throughout time. It is just one aspect of a person's identity, alongside ethnicity, nationality, religion, indigenous or minority status, socio-economic status, disability, age, sexual orientation and so forth. Our approach to gender is therefore intersectional, recognising that a person's gendered experience is also influenced by their other identities.

Gender is one of the factors that influence, positively and negatively, the ability of societies to manage conflict without resorting to violence. Rigid interpretation of gender norms (such as men's honour being associated with protecting the family and women's being associated with purity and caregiving) can be an important underlying cause of high levels of violence throughout society. Individuals who have the courage to break prevailing gender norms and stand up against violence risk losing fundamental rights and endanger their own safety. Violent conflict can be a driver for changes in gender relations. For example, women often take on a broader range of economic and societal roles in times of conflict. But societal expectations of the roles of different genders can also become more inflexible and restrictive during violent conflict. We aim to make use of positive changes in gender relations during conflict to promote more peaceful and inclusive societies.

Our network of local, national and regional **partners** is central to our ability to bring about change. The changes we seek usually require work and influence by multiple actors, beyond the capacity of a single organisation. Peacebuilding therefore requires collaboration with others locally, nationally, regionally and globally, working within networks of peers as well as with diverse stakeholders, in order to have an impact at scale. Our collaboration with partners takes many forms, tailored to the opportunities and needs of the contexts in which we work. Wherever possible, we

establish long-term, strategic partnerships, in which our partners influence our priorities, we share learning and we advocate together. As an international NGO, we amplify the efforts, impact and voice of our partners and connect them to each other and to other contexts.

Our accompaniment includes securing funding for partners' work, providing training, mentoring and other capacity building in peacebuilding and organisational management, and working together to influence powerholders to bring about change. Our partners support us through grounding our understanding of conflict, shaping our approach to peacebuilding, expanding our reach, sharing learning and ensuring we remain adaptive and relevant in the contexts in which we work.

## Building peaceful relationships

Relationships between people who disagree are necessary both to address immediate direct violence and to bring about changes to institutions, attitudes and behaviours that underpin structural violence. We work to support the building of trusting relationships between powerholders and wider society (known as *vertical relationships*) and among people across society (known as *horizontal relationships*).

Most societies have legitimate **power** structures, in which some people have more power than others and make decisions on behalf of the group, be that a community, region or state. In order for society to be peaceful (both addressing conflicts without using violence and addressing entrenched inequalities which give rise to conflict), decisions made by those with power should be responsive to the needs of all in society as well as effective and accountable. People should have influence over the choice of those who provide them with leadership and over the directions and conduct of such leaders. They also need to be able to voice their opinions about whether this system of governance is working well or if it needs adjusting. Violent conflict often emerges due to two or more parties competing for power. In societies that use democracy as the model for selecting leaders, **elections** can be key moments of violence. We therefore work with those with a stake in elections to prevent violence before, during or after elections.

A society with a well-functioning governance structure provides opportunities for everyone to **participate in governance** discussions and decisions about who has power and how that power is exercised. Prospects for peace are strongest when governments operate transparently and accountably to deliver goods and services to the population, when laws reflect the common good, and when people and their leaders collaborate to define and take practical action on the right priorities. We help citizens and authorities establish constructive and peaceful relationships, so they can work together to solve the problems causing conflict in their communities. We help people to shape the decisions that affect their lives and advise governments on how to support the freedoms needed for a vibrant civil society.

We recognise that the state can be a negative force in people's lives and can cause or reinforce both direct and indirect violence. This may be due to highly bureaucratic or securitised state structures, institutions that consolidate unequal national or international trading relationships, or socio-economic policies that leave the poorest most vulnerable to economic crises. We seek to support improved **transparency and social accountability** by states or others in power, enabling people to challenge deeply embedded inequalities and established relationships between those in power that actively continue to exclude others.

Strong horizontal relationships within communities, particularly between people from different groups, are essential in preventing conflict from escalating into violence. Such relationships are also important in bringing those who have been at conflict back into a more normal and stable social interaction. Much of our work and that of our partners is focussed on strengthening this **social cohesion** – the relationships and sense of connectedness among members of a community. A cohesive society has mechanisms for managing conflict peacefully between members of groups and between groups, and is therefore more resilient to violence. Building trusting relationships fundamentally requires people to come together and talk, repeatedly, to understand each other and build common understandings, even if not agreement. And where people can see benefits for themselves of engaging peacefully with others, they have more interest in developing and maintaining positive relationships. This is why dialogue is both a tool of our peacebuilding as well as an end in itself.

Conflict inflicts its mark on individuals, communities and societies well after the violence ends. Following violent conflict, relationships within society are broken and explicit efforts are often needed to bring people (back) together and enable everyone to live normal lives. This work includes **reintegration** of former combatants back into their communities and **reconciliation** between previously conflicting parties. We believe that when people are able to talk and share experiences, they are more likely to resolve their differences peacefully. However, talking alone may not be enough. We often couple dialogue with psychological and practical support to help heal trauma and create opportunities for individuals – and communities – to build their lives again. We seek to ensure that reconciliation processes are owned at a local level but linked to national processes, so that views and priorities of communities are fed into government policies and practices.

**Sexual and gender-based violence** (SGBV) is direct interpersonal violence that is rooted in gender inequality, societal norms and abuse of power, such as patriarchal gender norms that reserve leadership for male elders and expect subservience from younger women. These norms also serve to exclude those from LGBT+ communities, who can be victims of SGBV. We recognise that constructive change in the family can not only reduce SGBV but also have far reaching consequences beyond the family in the reduction of direct and structural violence.



A youth dialogue group in Bekaa, eastern Lebanon, do an assessment of a site selected for 'placemaking', which is about reimagining and reinventing an existing public space. © Ghina Kanawaty/Catalytic Action

A person's **religion** shapes what they believe to be true, their identity and how they perceive the world and other people. It can also shape political goals and play a role in social and political change. As a result, religion can be a driver of violent conflict, emphasising the otherness of another group, legitimising violence and mobilising believers. But as a powerful framework of values and for mobilising, socialising and integrating people, religion can also play a significant role in peacebuilding. Religious leaders have influence and respect at all levels of society and can be great allies in bringing about positive social change, including changes to entrenched values that sometimes contribute to structural violence.

### Keeping the peace

Societies have developed multiple ways to manage relationships between people, and in particular disagreements or tensions between their members, without use of violence. We work to support these institutions to work inclusively and equitably, and where necessary adapt.

Effective laws reduce the ability of people to use or provoke violence and protect everyone's human rights. In addition to fair laws, a peaceful society needs effective mechanisms to enforce those laws, ensuring that they apply to everyone in society. Such mechanisms enable prevention, protection and punishment, and enable **justice** not only to be done, but to be seen to be done. This includes being able to pursue truth and justice for crimes committed during violent conflict. We recognise how central justice is to

reconciliation and work with formal and informal transitional justice processes to ensure they are more inclusive, participatory and responsive to the needs of communities.

In a peaceful society, everyone can live their lives in **security**, without undue fear of physical or psychological threat. Although the physical prevention of violence alone is not enough to create peace, it is an essential component. Where violence is seen as a legitimate way to resolve personal or local conflicts, it is more likely to be used in political or other conflicts. State or community security forces must have the trust of the societies they are recruited to protect, and the skills and capacity to undertake that protection. We analyse the reasons behind insecurity and public perceptions of security actors, and explore their impact on political and social instability. We use this knowledge to work with communities, governments and international agencies to devise practical responses that reduce harm, build respect for the rule of law and help ensure greater security and stability for citizens.

A free and independent **media** enables all members of society to access, share and debate information about what is happening in that society. It also plays an important role in holding those in power to account, monitoring and reporting on their actions, and providing a public space for dialogue between citizens and government. Restrictions on media freedom threaten the open exchange of views within society and hence the ability of members of that society to

resolve conflicts peacefully. And the way in which the media reports can either enflame or reduce conflict, as can the way social media is used. We work to both hold open the space for a free media and to support journalists and social media actors to work in a conflict-sensitive way.

Where institutions are not able to ensure the peaceful management of conflict, **early warning of violence** can prevent escalation and enable swift support to those affected by violence. Understanding potential triggers of violence requires a deep understanding of the context, through conversations, research and dialogue, to build a picture of people's experiences of security and insecurity. We use technology to manage data, forecast organised violence and make insights widely available to those who can take action to prevent or mitigate violence.

## Living peaceful lives

In a peaceful society, people have fair access to services of decent standards that enable them to live in dignity. Mental and physical wellbeing are maintained and people are able to work towards fulfilling their aspirations. People go about their lives without using violence to do the normal things that we all seek to do: earn a living, stay healthy, raise the next generation and fulfil our emotional and spiritual needs. We work to address structural limitations and ensure fair access to services, to enable all people to live their diverse lives peacefully. As well as satisfying individual needs, such work reduces the risk of some groups' grievances resulting in violence and enables diverse contributions to peaceful social change.

Everyone needs to be able to make a living, to provide for themselves and their families. Therefore, ensuring fair and inclusive **economic opportunities** is a key factor in developing a peaceful society. If people are financially excluded, particularly on the basis of some aspect of their identity, there is a risk of increased social tension and potentially violence. We work with all sorts of economic actors, from supporting young people to set up small businesses and reduce the attraction of violent means to secure money, through supporting traders to fairly and easily access sustainable livelihoods, to working with large companies to ensure their operations do not exacerbate conflicts. Whether through aid delivered at the height of a conflict, ongoing business and trade, or investments made in post-conflict settings, economic policies and practices play a huge role in fragile and conflict-affected places. Businesses, development organisations, informal economic actors, policy-makers and investors can exacerbate or drive conflict through their political, socio-economic and environmental impacts. They also have the power to contribute to addressing conflict and actively build the conditions for peace. We aim to address the structural causes of conflict by influencing economic actors at the local, national, regional and international level to understand the impact of their work on societies. We help companies, financial institutions and investors to mainstream **conflict-sensitive business practices** in their policies and

operations, and to comply with accountability frameworks such as the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights.

Competition over the natural resources needed to live and earn a living, including land, forests and water, is a major driver of conflict. Systematic, fair, inclusive and responsive **natural resource management** is therefore integral to preventing conflict. It is also vital to effective **climate change** adaptation and mitigation efforts. Climate extremes and variability are threatening the livelihoods, food security, health and wellbeing of millions of people worldwide, with those living in fragile and conflict-affected places disproportionately affected. These same countries are most likely to have weak governance and institutions, and high levels of social and economic inequality, leaving them ill-equipped to deal with the impacts of climate change. This can create or exacerbate community tensions and fragility, with the potential to lead to violent conflict, which in turn degrades natural resources further. We bring together communities, authorities and businesses to design effective and conflict-sensitive management solutions for natural resources.

**Education** also plays a crucial role in shaping the norms in society and providing young people with the tools to live decent lives. Schools not only provide knowledge and skills, but they also shape social and cultural values, norms and attitudes. Yet they can often be sites of both direct violence (by teachers or peers) and structural violence (when what is taught and how it is taught embed divisions and inequitable norms). The way in which education is provided should support children to grow up with the desire and ability to resolve conflicts without violence. We work with formal and informal education sectors to reduce direct violence between individuals in educational settings and to unpick structural factors that drive conflict and violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how **health** crises can exacerbate direct and structural violence across the globe, especially in already fragile situations. The provision of health services can be a driver of conflict as well as expose inequalities elsewhere in society. One in five people affected by conflict experiences serious mental health difficulties. The emotional, mental and physical symptoms associated with mental health problems among those living through violent conflict can cause them to withdraw and experience social exclusion, lead to harmful coping methods and hinder social cohesion. Focusing on individual healing, rebuilding trust and relationships and repairing the social fabric can create a context in which wellbeing is more likely to be protected and nurtured. Healing these individual and social wounds through work on **mental health and psychosocial support** (MHPSS) is essential to ensure that future conflicts can be addressed peacefully.

# What are Alert's peacebuilding methods?

There are multiple tools that diverse actors use to build peace, dependent on their capacities and comparative advantages in addressing the needs of the contexts in which they work. As an international NGO, we use the approaches that are most suited to our role and our beliefs about conflict and society.

Working to bring about peace first requires an understanding of what is causing the violence. We begin our work with **research and analysis** of the conflict in question, including what drives it and who is involved. This **conflict analysis**, undertaken with those most affected by the conflict, forms the bedrock of our programming. Regular analysis with our partners enables us to effectively adapt our peacebuilding to changing dynamics.

Social and economic changes can cause or exacerbate conflicts. Development, humanitarian and even peacebuilding programming can therefore have a significant impact on peace and security in fragile and conflict-affected places. If these risks are not identified, managed and mitigated well, these conflicts can become violent. But if managed well, people across the sector can actively contribute to reducing both direct and structural violence. We support the integration of **conflict and gender sensitivity** practices into the operations of organisations working in fragile and conflict-affected places.

**Dialogue** is a central tool in our peacebuilding. It involves bringing people together across conflict lines to improve relationships and build trust. By providing a space to understand one another's different perspectives and to each feel heard, dialogue provides people and groups with the chance to communicate about conflict issues constructively. This could be to resolve a particular dispute (for example over access to water or land) or creating a safe space for ongoing communication to reduce tensions and misconceptions, and to create a shared vision for change.

Building peace is challenging work and people must be in a secure position to engage, mentally, physically and economically. Addressing trauma and adopting approaches that address the psychological and social needs of people and communities is fundamental to building long-term peace. We therefore integrate **MHPSS** into much of our

work, whether our programming is focussed on education, justice, gender-based violence or social cohesion. We also frequently incorporate **economic development** initiatives, to increase people's economic security and hence improve their resilience to resorting to violence to address grievances. Such activities provide incentives and opportunities for bringing people together to engage in wider relationship building towards greater social cohesion and long-term peace.

Bringing about social change, whether to reduce direct violence or structural violence, requires **influencing** those with the power, capacity or mandate to change structures, attitudes and behaviours in society. Our influencing work involves engaging with others to enable them to change both practices and policies. To do this, we draw on our own experience, research and analysis, as well as the knowledge of our partners and local peacebuilders. We recognise that our role as an international NGO brings particular responsibilities as well as privileges. We seek to use our ability to **convene stakeholders** across countries and sectors to influence positive global change and enable the voices of those affected by conflict to be heard in the decisions that affect them.

## Endnotes

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